

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 12/23/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

The Bible was not written by GOD. It was written by people who were inspired by GOD to write the story GOD wanted us to know. But each writer brings their own biases and priorities for what they wish to share, and by thinking about that as you read you can begin to learn something of the writers as well as their message.

For example, the two writing sources for the first two chapters of Genesis each want to talk about creation. The first, in Genesis 1:1-2:3, presents how GOD brought order out of chaos. Humankind is part of that ordering and appears in the logical progression of development of creation. The second, in Genesis 2:4-25 offers a perspective on the role of human beings in creation. In this narration, man is the first thing GOD creates after the foundation of the world. All the plants and animals come later and human beings are given responsibility to care for everything else.

In the New Testament, there is a progression in the history of the writings that may also reflect the priorities of the early Christian church as time passes. Paul's letters, though presented after the gospels, are the earliest writings recorded in the New Testament, written in the 50's. Paul never says anything about JESUS' life, except that HE was crucified and rose again. For Paul, that is the center of the gospel message.

Mark's gospel, the first of the four gospels written, was penned in the late 60's or early 70's. Mark seems to have been aware that the apostles, who were telling the story of JESUS, were being martyred and that it would not be long before those stories would be lost. Mark records the valuable, first-hand narratives he had heard the apostles tell and especially those shared by Peter who was the leader of the early church. Mark's gospel begins with the baptism of JESUS, tells of HIS public ministry, and the oldest manuscripts end with the crucifixion and the empty tomb. Mark also has an urgency in his gospel and frequently uses words like "suddenly," "immediately," "then," or "next."

Matthew and Luke, most likely written in the 80's both use Mark's gospel as a source for their writings. Both Matthew and Luke go back to JESUS' birth and end their gospels with resurrection appearances by JESUS. Matthew, who is writing to a Jewish audience, includes many prophecies from the Old Testament with which his readers would have been familiar to show that JESUS is the fulfillment of what the prophets had predicted about the coming MESSIAH. Matthew's nativity story focuses on the lineage of JESUS through Joseph, HIS earthly father. This patriarchal line would have been important to potential Jewish believers. His inclusion of the magi in the birth story emphasizes that JESUS came for both Jews and non-Jews. Luke, on the other hand, presents the genealogy of JESUS through Mary and includes the shepherds in the that nativity story to emphasize that JESUS comes to and for the lowly.

John's gospel, written in the 90's, goes even further back in nativity story by writing that the WORD, who became flesh as JESUS, was there at the very beginning and opens his gospel with the same words with which Genesis begins. John writes his gospel to challenge some of the heresies of his day. John contradicts those who claimed that JESUS was adopted or possessed by GOD at HIS baptism by showing that JESUS is divine and was present at the creation of the world. John also emphasizes the

authority of GOD in JESUS over earthly powers and rulers like Rome and the emperor, who were persecuting Christians at the time of the gospel's writing.

Reading the Bible can be a fascinating exploration of much more than just what it says. It can tell us much about what came before and after, and the context into which it was written. Asking questions about the Bible will help us to understand, not only the issues of that time, but also what it can say to us today. It can inspire us as we read the words of others who were inspired themselves to tell the story that the world might know about GOD'S love for all people, especially as it is revealed in JESUS CHRIST.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey